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## T. S. ELIOT: IMPERSONAL POETRY AND TRADITION

by Darlene Tennerstedt

T. S. Eliot was the harbinger of a revolutionary wave of literary criticism that swept over the academic world in the twentieth century and culminated in the postmodern philosophies of Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault. Central to Eliot's approach was his concept of "impersonal poetry" and, closely related, his attitude justifying "tradition" as an integral part of the process in writing poetry.

Impersonal poetry arose as a direct reaction against Romanticism, where the poet saw his poetry as an extension of himself and where, similarly, criticism treated poetry as a personal object. In "A Defense of Poetry," Shelley says, "A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds" (6, 519). Eliot puts an end to this personal approach, at least as far as criticism is concerned.

In "Tradition and Individual Talent," Eliot says, "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (3, 5), and in this same essay he examines the importance of tradition. The link to tradition is important because Eliot himself finds it difficult in this essay to separate the poet from his work. In the following quote the underlined words are my emphasis: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone . . ." (3, 49), and so forth with a continued emphasis on "his." But Eliot makes a transition in subjects in the next few lines, and now it is the "work" that is related to the dead poets: "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them" (3, 50). Are the "monuments" the poets or their works? In the rest of the paragraph, it becomes apparent that the "work" and the "poet" are nearly interchangeable in the context of "existing monuments." If both make up the monuments, then Eliot has violated his cardinal law and has admitted that the monuments are the poet/poetry; he is judging the poet by his poetry and the poetry by the poet. It is a subtle distinction, but it is there and stands as an example of the fine line that Eliot must draw between what he says and what he means, in this case between personal and impersonal prose.

Two important questions are to what degree does Eliot separate poetic style from impersonal poetry and to what degree does he separate style from self. Eliot says, "The

progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (3, 53). In his essay "Blake," Eliot seems to mean what he has said about extinction of the personality. Eliot criticizes Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell" on the basis of Blake's creation of a philosophy as well as a poem and says that the philosophy becomes even more pronounced in Blake's longer poems: "The fault is most evident, of course in the longer poems—or rather the poems in which structure is important. You cannot create a very large poem without introducing a more impersonal point of view" (2, 156). In contrast to Blake's treatment of philosophy, Eliot offers these comments in his essay on Dante: "Dante, more than any other poet, has succeeded in dealing with his philosophy, not as a theory or as his own comment or reflection, but in terms of something perceived" (2, 171). The distinction is one of creation versus perception of a philosophy, but surely perception can be as personalized as creation. Referring to Blake's "supernatural territories" in the longer poems, Eliot says, "They illustrate the crankiness, the eccentricity, which frequently affects writers outside of the Latin traditions" (2, 157). Apparently Eliot would not even have us be aware of the poet's mood.

Thus far Eliot's statements about impersonal poetry and the extinction of personality seem consistent, but earlier in the essay "Blake" he seems, at first glance, to have taken a completely different tack. He says that it was to Blake's advantage to have missed any formal education because he would have been hindered rather than helped by it: "For these processes consist largely in the acquisition of impersonal ideas which obscure what we really are and feel, what we really want, and what really excites our interest." The impersonal ideas to which he refers would serve to suppress the emotion and personality of the poet. It seems an irony that Eliot requires the poet to suppress these things in his poetry while he requires those same things for the poet to write it. In A History of Modern Criticism, Rene Welleck includes a lengthy chapter on Eliot and proposes what might be a solution to this problem: "The impersonality of the poet must, it seems, be taken to mean that poetry is not a direct transcript of experience, but it cannot mean that it is devoid of personal characteristics. . . . Eliot modifies his view himself when he recognizes that the poet expresses his personality indirectly through concentrating upon his task which is a task in the same sense as the making of an efficient engine or the turning of a jug or a table leg" (8, 183). This solution is not altogether satisfactory because it would be nearly impossible to interpret the personality of a carpenter from the table leg he made. Gerald Graff provides another interpretation for Eliot's impersonal poetry. In Literature Against Itself, he says, "When Eliot banished personality, he meant to banish only the idiosyncratic personality. The poem remains an expression of personality, but it

is the collective personality of modern man, or of the 'mind of Europe,' not the personality of a unique individual" (4, 140). This would fit well with Eliot's feeling about tradition and assimilation into "existing monuments," but it is too broad for Eliot's emphasis on the individual "his" discussed earlier.

Perhaps the answer lies in a different metaphor. It seems that Eliot might be satisfied if the poet behaved like a reporter writing a news story. The story should contain neither biographical information about the reporter nor an editorial statement taking a stand on the issues, but it could elaborate in several directions and even report speculation, as long as it was not personally biased. To do a good job, the reporter would require an individual personality which contained curiosity, interest in his subject, and enough mental energy to acquire all the facts and observations necessary. The report could even provoke emotional responses of anger or sympathy from the reader. This seems to answer all of Eliot's criteria, but like all metaphors it too breaks down because a poem is not the same thing as a news report, and it is the ungraspable difference that sets literary theories at odds with one another. Poetry has its own person-ality. Whether it is acquired from the author, to Eliot's chagrin, or imbued by the reader, poetry is a communication set apart from other kinds of communication.

The same essay in which Eliot criticizes Blake for making his poetry too personal also points out Blake's lack of tradition: "What his genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own, and concentrated his attention upon the problems of the poet" (1, 158). This is precisely what Eliot discusses in "Tradition and Individual Talent." His idea of literary tradition involves a historical sense that a new writer must possess. He must write with a sense of the whole of literature: "This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal together, is what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity" (3, 49). Eliseo Vivas, interpreting Eliot's comments on tradition, says, "but the artist conserves and renovates as much as he innovates. . . . Without both phases (innovation and renovation), culture could not achieve the continuity essential to the transmission of knowledge which is essential in turn to give culture identity in time" (7, 18).

Here again, as in "impersonal poetry," the reader must struggle a little with Eliot's surface dichotomy. In the first instance, the poet must depersonalize the extraordinarily personal activity of writing poetry, and now he insists that the great poet be traditional and creative, with Vivas interpreting creative as innovative and renovative. This is quite a task. The poet must add to the existing monuments, and Blake, especially in his later



work, had become a monument unto himself. True, he had steeped himself in Milton, but in his epic poem dedicated to Milton there was none of Milton's sense of order or reason, or even common sense. There was none of what Gerald Graff called "collective personality" in Blake, and this is what Eliot finds so damning.

It is interesting to note that the growth of Eliot's existing monuments seems to have ended about two hundred years before his own appearance on the literary scene. In Professing Literature, Graff comments on Eliot's view of recent tradition: "Eliot's account of the history of poetry since the seventeenth century is the story of a more or less uninterrupted decline from the unified sensibility of the Renaissance into the long interregnum of dissociation, only recently reversing itself in the symbolists and the poets of Eliot's own generation" (5, 204). Here we come back to the question posed in the beginning of this paper: to what degree does Eliot separate style from self? The Romantic movement was a "style" of poetry in which self-expression was explored, not unlike the modern formless style of "imaging," or the Homeric epic style, or the Petrarchan style. After examining what Eliot has said about impersonal poetry and tradition and examining what other critics have said about them, it seems to be Eliot's own bias of style that lies at the heart of the impersonal poetry issue.

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